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SUBJECT: K MAY WANT GOOD RELATIONS, BUT GOA DEFENSIVE OF
USG CRITICISM OF CHAVEZ RALLY

REF: BUENOS AIRES

Classified By: Ambassador E. Anthony Wayne for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

11. (C) Summary. "Kirchner truly believes that the USG abandoned Argentina," Deputy Foreign Minister Garcia Moritan told the Ambassador on March 20 in an attempt to explain why Kirchner allowed Venezuelan President Chavez to host an anti-US rally in Buenos Aires during President Bush's visit to Uruguay. Garcia Moritan insisted, however, that Kirchner also wants a good relationship with the US government despite recent events, adding that Kirchner called Evo Morales to ask him not to join the March 9 Chavez rally in Buenos Aires. He suggested that the relationship move forward at the Ministerial level with Argentina perhaps proposing a joint initiative that could be developed together.

12. (C) Local press coverage of Under Secretary Burns's remarks to the Council of the Americas on March 22 was largely balanced, noting his praise for Argentina's cooperation on Iran, Haiti, and non-proliferation issues, as well as his criticism that the GOA decision to allow Chavez's anti-US summit was "unfortunate" and "inappropriate". Foreign Minister Taiana, Cabinet Chief Fernandez, and Interior Minister Fernandez all strongly rejected the USG criticism, characterizing the rally as a legitimate form of freedom of expression. Taiana called Burns's comments "unacceptable." Kirchner still has not reacted to Under Secretary Burns's remarks, and it is possible that the

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statements from his Cabinet chiefs are an attempt to preempt Kirchner from saying something that could escalate the rhetoric and potentially damage the bilateral relationship.
End Summary.

DFM Garcia Moritan on K's Abandonment Issues

13. (C) During a March 20 one-on-one meeting with Argentine Deputy Foreign Minister Garcia Moritan (protect), the Ambassador expressed in detail our serious dismay at the GoA's decision to host Chavez's anti-U.S. rally during President Bush's visit to Uruguay. Garcia Moritan disclosed that Kirchner originally turned down Chavez's request that Argentina host the rally and that Kirchner only conceded later the same day when Chavez persisted. Although Kirchner allowed the Chavez rally to take place, he drew the line at Chavez's invitation for Bolivian President Morales to join in the rally, calling Morales asking him not to attend, Garcia Moritan claimed.

14. (C) In an attempt to explain why Kirchner ultimately allowed the rally to take place, Garcia Moritan cited several reasons. First, he said that "Kirchner truly believes the USG abandoned Argentina." Second, he reiterated that, at the November 2005 Summit of the Americas, Kirchner was particularly upset over the USG's decision not to include language addressing the Falklands/Malvinas islands sovereignty question in the Summit declaration. Third, he stated that Kirchner was concerned that the U.S. was trying to divide Mercosur by visiting only Brazil and Uruguay. Nevertheless, Garcia Moritan stated that at the same time, Kirchner genuinely wants to improve US-Argentine relations, thus his attempt to distance himself and the GOA from the March 9 rally. Garcia Moritan stated that he understood that relations at the Presidential level would most likely not be repaired, but suggested that the relationship should move forward at the Ministerial level. He suggested, for example, that Foreign Minister Taiana might propose a joint U.S.-Argentine initiative of some sort that could be developed together. Garcia Moritan repeated several times that the U.S. and Argentina have such an important bilateral relationship on such topics as non-proliferation, counter-terrorism, fighting drugs, Haiti, etc., that we need to work hard to keep the cooperation moving ahead.

Press on Burns's remarks is balanced...

15. (SBU) On March 22, newswires reported Under Secretary Burns's remarks to the Council of the Americas where he discussed the President's positive agenda for Latin America and criticized Argentina for its decision to allow Chavez to organize an anti-U.S. rally during President Bush's trip to Uruguay. Local press reports on March 23 were largely balanced, noting that Burns praised Argentina for its cooperation on Iran and Haiti, its leadership on

non-proliferation issues, and its efforts to bring to justice the perpetrators of the 1990s terrorist attacks on the Israeli Embassy and the Argentine Israeli Mutual Association center. At the same time, the press reported Burns's characterization of the anti-US rally as "unfortunate" and "inappropriate" and his request that Argentina's policy of "friendship" with the United States be more "coherent" and "consistent" to help strengthen the bilateral relationship.

16. (SBU) One article noted that the USG response to the anti-Bush rally took place thirteen days after the incident and suggested that the delay in response reflected Washington's decision not to dignify the event with an immediate response. The same article speculated that Kirchner's decision to allow the rally to take place was a signal directed more at Uruguay than United States, given heightened tensions between Argentina and Uruguay over the pulp mills dispute.

...but GOA calls comments "unacceptable" claiming rally was a legitimate form of free speech

17. (SBU) FM Taiana, who is currently accompanying First Lady and Senator Cristina Fernandez de Kirchner on a trip to Ecuador and Venezuela, stated from Quito that it was "unacceptable" for Under Secretary Burns to "criticize a public rally organized by civil society organizations and a South American President. The rally was an exercise in freedom of speech which is appropriate in all democratic countries." Local press also reported Chief of Cabinet Alberto Fernandez and Interior Minister Anibal Fernandez separately asserting that the USG should respect GoA decisions and not interfere in the affairs of other countries. Neither Burns nor anyone else will tell Kirchner what he can and cannot do. Cabinet Chief Fernandez described the rally as a gathering held by a president of a sister nation for his Argentine supporters. Both compared the Chavez gathering in Buenos Aires to his appearance in Harlem

during the September 2006 UNGA, and questioned why Chavez should be allowed to hold a rally in New York but not Buenos Aires.

18. (SBU) Argentine Ambassador to the United States Jose Bordon stated in an interview with Radio Diez that Burns's remarks do not equate to a formal complaint. He said the USG has a right to be bothered by the incident, and Argentina has a right to respect the freedom of expression within its own borders. He highlighted that the government did not participate in the rally, and compared the event to the freedom of expression that Argentine diplomats exercise when they travel to Venezuela and meet with the government as well as the opposition.

19. (C) In a March 22 conversation between the Ambassador and Argentine Ambassador Bordon, both expressed concern over how President Kirchner would react to the Under Secretary's comments. Bordon indicated that he he had already reached out to FM Taiana urging him to work to avoid a public response by the President. Comment: It is possible that Taiana's statement and subsequent comments from Kirchner's Cabinet Chief and Interior Minister are an attempt to preempt Kirchner from saying something that could escalate the rhetoric and potentially do more serious damage to the bilateral relationship.

Comment

110. (C) The public comments by Under Secretary Burns on USG disapproval of the Chavez rally on March 9, while very balanced and polite (and accepted as such by much of the press) apparently left the GOA leadership feeling it needed to respond quickly and harshly. The public comments by three Ministers on March 23 may be the end of this latest exchange. Whether the statements by members of Kirchner's Cabinet will preempt Kirchner from railing against the United States, as he is wont to do, remains to be seen. We note his recent public snipe at "countries that abandoned Argentina." End Comment.
WAYNE